

Abstract 370

TITLE: Networking and the Influence of Established Norms in Risk Reduction Behavior
Among Culturally Diverse, Low Income Women at Risk of HIV.

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BACKGROUND: The influence of established norms and peerbased normative context on sexual behavior has been recognized as an important factor in adolescent behavior. Such influence among adults has received little attention, however. HIV prevention interventions for adults tend to focus on reducing individuals' risk behaviors and ignore the normative environment in which those behaviors take place. We examine this normative context by looking at whether adult women network with other women regarding HIV risk reduction practices and to what degree it is normatively acceptable for women to inquire about their main partners' risk. We also examine how networking and established norms vary by sociodemographic characteristics and their association with actual HIV risk reduction behaviors.

METHODS: We analyzed baseline data collected as part of a cognitive behavioral intervention project in Miami, FL (1994-5) aimed at preventing high risk sexual and drug-use behaviors among culturally diverse, low income women at risk of HIV between the ages of 18 and 45.

RESULTS: Data reported is based on 552 women who completed a baseline survey (26% Black, 33% White non-Hispanic, and 41% Hispanic). Bivariate analyses (Chi Square, Cramer's C or Kendall Tau) show that African-Americans and Hispanics, younger women and those with no current main partner were more likely to network and to report a higher degree of normative acceptance for inquiring about a main partner's risks. Further, both high levels of networking and normative acceptance are associated with ever having thought about using a condom with a main partner (51% of those having thought about it reported high levels of normative acceptance vs. 38% of those not having considered using a condom). High degree of normative acceptance is also associated with: (1) having made changes in sex life because of AIDS (53% vs. 43%; $p < .05$); (2) higher levels of condom use with main partner (87% of those reporting high normative acceptance used condoms in at least half the vaginal encounters with main partner $p < .01$); (3) comfort discussing condom use with main partner (50% of those comfortable reported high normative acceptance vs. 33% of those uncomfortable; $p < .05$), and (4) control over birth control decision-making (54% of women reporting sole or shared decisions reported high normative acceptance vs 32% of those reporting that no decision was made; $p < .001$).

CONCLUSIONS: Changing risk behaviors entails taking normative context into account since adult women, not only adolescents, are susceptible to HIV prevention norms in their immediate environment. Individuals' perceptions of what peers do in their relationships are likely to influence their own relationship dynamics and their preventive behaviors. The implications of the importance of normative environments on the structure and content of HIV prevention interventions are discussed.

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